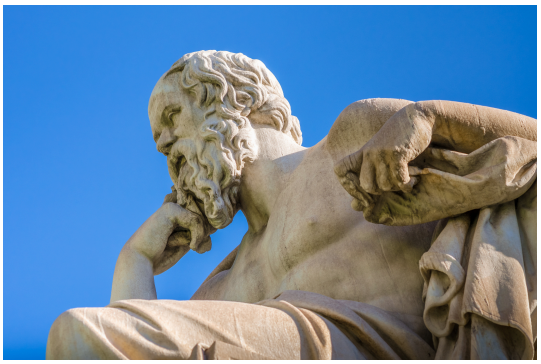
Know Thyself: The Philosophy of Self-Knowledge

August 7, 2018 | Kenneth Best

Dating back to an ancient Greek inscription, the injunction to 'know thyself' has encouraged people to engage in a search for self-understanding. Philosophy professor Mitchell Green discusses its history and relevance to the present.

UConn philosopher Mitchell S. Green leads a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) titled Know Thyself: The Value and Limits of Self-Knowledge on the online learning platform Coursera. The course is based on his 2018 book (published by Routledge) of the same name. He recently spoke with Ken Best of UConn Today about the philosophy and understanding of self-knowledge. This is an edited transcript of their discussion.



Q. 'Know Thyself' was carved into stone at the entrance to Apollo's temple at Delphi in Greece, according to legend. Scholars, philosophers, and civilizations have debated this question for a long time. Why have we not been able to find the answer?

A. I'm not sure that every civilization or even most civilizations have taken the goal to achieve self-knowledge as being among the most important ones. It comes and goes. It did have cachet in the Greece of 300-400 BC. Whether it had similar cachet 200 years later or had something like cultural importance in the heyday of Roman civilization is another question. Of course some philosophers would have enjoined people to engage in a search for self-understanding; some not so much. Likewise, think about the Middle Ages. There's a case in which we don't get a whole lot of emphasis on knowing the self, instead the focus was on knowing God. It's only when Descartes comes on the scene centuries later that we begin to get more of a focus on introspection and understanding ourselves by looking within. Also, the injunction to "know thyself" is not a question, and would have to be modified in some way to pose a question. However, suppose the question is, "Is it possible to know oneself, either in part or fully." In that case, I'd suggest that we've made considerable progress in answering this question over the last two millennia, and in the Know Thyself book, and in the MOOC of the same name, I try to guide readers and students through some of what we have learned.

Q. You point out that the shift Descartes brought about is a turning point in Western philosophy.

A. Right. It's for various reasons cultural, political, economic, and ideological that the norm of self-knowledge has come and gone with the tides through Western history. Even if we had been constantly enjoined to achieve self-knowledge for the 2,300 years since the time Socrates spoke, just as Sigmund Freud said about civilization – that civilization is constantly being created anew and everyone being born has to work their way up to being civilized being – so, too, the project of achieving self-knowledge is a project for every single new member of our species. No one can be given it at birth. It's not an achievement you get for free like a high IQ or a prominent chin. Continuing to beat that drum, to remind people of the importance of that, is something we'll always be doing. I'm doubtful we'll ever reach a point we can all say: Yup, we're good on that. We've got that covered, we've got self-knowledge down. That's a challenge for each of us, every time somebody is born. I would also say, given the ambient, environmental factors as well as the predilections that we're born with as part of our cognitive and genetic nature, there are probably pressures that push against self-knowledge as well. For instance, in the book I talk about the cognitive immune system that tends to make us spin information in our own favor. When something goes bad, there's a certain part of us, hopefully within bounds, that tends to see the glass as half full rather than half empty. That's probably a good way of getting yourself up off the floor after you've been knocked down.

Q. Retirement planners tell us you're supposed to know yourself well enough to know what your needs are going to be – create art or music, or travel – when you have all of your time to use. At what point should that point of getting to know yourself better begin?

A. I wouldn't encourage a 9-year-old to engage in a whole lot of self-scrutiny, but I would say even when you're young some of those indirect, especially self-distancing, types of activities, can be of value. Imagine a 9-year-old gets in a fight on the playground and a teacher asks him: Given what you said to the other kid that provoked the fight, if he had said that to you, how would you feel? That might be intended to provoke an inkling of self-knowledge – if not in the form of introspection, in the form of developing empathetic skills, which I think is part of self-knowledge because it allows me to see myself through another's eyes. Toward the other end of the lifespan, I'd also say in my experience lots of people who are in, or near, retirement have the idea they're going to stop working and be really happy. But I find in some cases that this expectation is not realistic because so many people find so much fulfillment, and rightly so, in their work. I would urge people to think about what it is that gives them satisfaction? Granted we sometimes find ourselves spitting nails as we think about the challenges our jobs present to us. But in some ways

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that frequent grumbling, the kind of hair-pulling stress and so forth, these might be part of what makes life fulfilling. More importantly, long-term projects, whether as part of one's career or post-career, tend I think to provide more intellectual and emotional sustenance than do the more ephemeral activities such as cruises, safaris, and the like.

Q. We're on a college campus with undergraduates trying to learn more about themselves through what they're studying. They're making decisions on what they might want to do with the rest of their life, taking classes like philosophy that encourage them to think about this. Is this an optimal time for this to take place?

A. For many students it's an optimal time. I consider one component of a liberal arts education to be that of cultivation of the self. Learning a lot of stuff is important, but in some ways that's just filling, which might be inert unless we give it form, or structure. These things can be achieved through cultivation of the self, and if you want to do that you have to have some idea of how you want it to grow and develop, which requires some inkling of what kind of person you think you are and what you think you can be. Those are achievements that students can only attain by trying things and seeing what happens. I am not suggesting that a freshman should come to college and plan in some rigorous and lockstep way to learn about themselves, cultivate themselves, and bring themselves into fruition as some fully formed adult upon graduation. Rather, there is much more messiness; much more unpredictable try things, it doesn't work, throw it aside, try something else. In spite of all that messiness and ambient chaos, I would also say in the midst of that there is potential for learning about yourself; taking note of what didn't go well, what can I learn from that? Or that was really cool, I'd like to build on that experience and do more of it. Those are all good ways of both learning about yourself and constructing yourself. Those two things can go hand-in-hand. Self-knowledge, self-realization, and self-scrutiny can happen, albeit in an often messy and unpredictable way for undergraduates. It's also illusory for us to think at age 22 we can put on our business clothes and go to work and stop with all that frivolous self-examination. I would urge that acquiring knowledge about yourself, understanding yourself is a lifelong task.

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Q. There is the idea that you should learn something new every day. A lot of people who go through college come to understand this, while some think after graduation, I'm done with that. Early in the book, you talk about Socrates' defense of himself when accused of corrupting students by teaching them in saying: I know what I don't know, which is why I ask questions.

A. That's very important insight on his part. That's something I would be inclined to yell from the rooftops, in the sense that one big barrier to achieving anything in the direction of self-knowledge is hubris, thinking that we do know, often confusing our confidence in our opinions with thinking that confidence is an indication of my degree of correctness. We feel sure, and take that surety itself to be evidence of the truth of what we think. Socrates is right to say that's a cognitive error, that's fallacious reasoning. We should ask ourselves: Do I know what I take myself to know? It seems to me the beginning of wisdom of any kind, including knowledge of ourselves, is acknowledgment of the infirmity of our beliefs and the paucity of our knowledge; the fact that opinions we have might just be opinions. It's always astonishing to me the disparity between the confidence with which people express their opinions, on one hand, and the negligible ability they have to back them up, especially those opinions that go beyond just whether they're hungry or prefer chocolate over vanilla. Those are things over which you can probably have pretty confident opinions. But when it comes to politics or science, history or human psychology, it's surprising to me just how gullible people are, not because they believe what other people say, so to speak, but rather they believe what they themselves say. They tend to just say: Here is what I think. It seems obvious to me and I'm not willing to even consider skeptical objections to my position.

Q. You also bring into the fold the theory of adaptive unconscious – that we observe and pick up information but we don't realize it at the time. How much does that feed into people thinking that they know themselves better than they do and know more than they think they do?

A. It's huge. There's a chapter in the book on classical psychoanalysis and Freud. I argue that the Freudian legacy is a broken one, in the sense that while his work is incredibly interesting – he made a lot of provocative and ingenious claims interesting – surprisingly few of them have been borne out with empirical evidence. This is a less controversial view than it was in the past. Experimental psychologists in the 1970s and 80s began to ask how many of those Freudian claims about the unconscious can be established in a rigorous, experimental way? The theory of the adaptive unconscious is an attempt to do that; to find out how much of the unconscious mind that Freud posited is real, and what is it like. One of the main findings is that the unconscious mind is not quite as bound up, obsessed with, sexuality and violence as posited by Freud. It's still a very powerful system, but not necessarily a thing to be kept at bay in the way psychoanalysis would have said. According to Freud, a great deal with the unconscious poses a constant threat to the well-functioning of civilized society, whereas for people like Tim Wilson, Tanya Chartrand, Daniel Gilbert, Joseph LeDoux, Paul Ekman, and many others, we've got a view that says that in many ways having an adaptive unconsciousness is a useful thing, an outsourcing of lots of cognition. It allows us to process information, interpret it, without having to consciously, painstakingly, and deliberately calculate things. It's really good in many ways that we have adaptive unconscious. On the other hand, it tends to predispose us, for example, to things like prejudice. Today there is a discussion about so-called implicit bias, which has taught us that because we grew up watching Hollywood movies where protagonist heroes were white or male, or both; saw stereotypes in advertising that have been promulgated – that experience, even if I have never had a consciously bigoted, racist, or sexist thought in my life, can still cause me to make choices that are biased. That's a part of the message on the theory of adaptive unconscious we would want to take very seriously and be worried about, because it can affect our choices in ways that we're not aware of.

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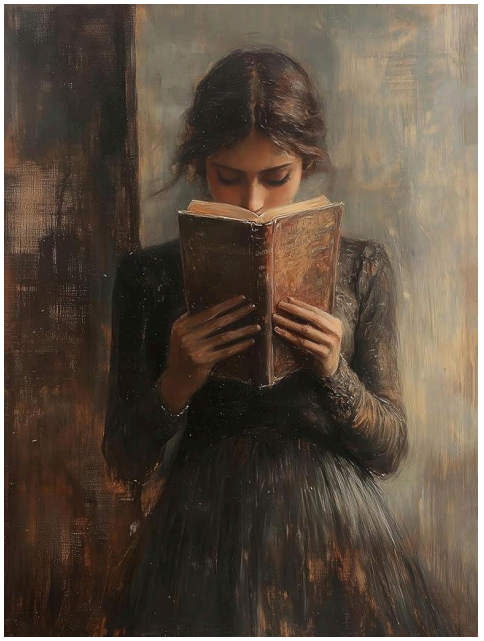
Q. With all of this we've discussed, what kind of person would know themselves well?



A. Knowing oneself well would, I suspect, be a multi-faceted affair, only one part of which would have to do with introspection as that notion is commonly understood. One of these facets involves acknowledging your limitations, "owning them" as my Department of Philosophy colleague Heather Battaly would put it. Those limitations can be cognitive – my lousy memory that distorts information, my tendency to sugarcoat any bad news I may happen to receive? Take the example of a professor reading student evaluations. It's easy to forget the negative ones and remember the positive ones – a case of "confirmation bias," as that term is used in psychology. Knowing that I tend to do that, if that's what I tend to do, allows me to take a second look, as painful as it might be. Again, am I overly critical of others? Do I tend to look at the glass as overly half full or overly half empty? Those are all limitations of the emotional kind, or at least have an important affective dimension. I suspect a person who knows herself well knows how to spot the characteristic ways in which she "spins" or otherwise distorts positive or negative information, and can then step back from such reactions, rather than taking them as the last word.

I'd also go back to empathy, knowing how to see things from another person's point of view. It is not guaranteed to, but is often apt to allow me to see myself more effectively, too. If I can to some extent put myself into your shoes, then I also have the chance to be able to see myself through your eyes and that might get me to realize things difficult to see from the first-person perspective. Empathizing with others who know me might, for instance, help to understand why they sometimes find me overbearing, cloying, or quick to judge.

Q. What would someone gain in self-knowledge by listening to someone appraising them and speaking to them about how well they knew them? How does that dynamic help?

A. It can help, but it also can be shocking. Experiments have suggested other people's assessments of an individual can often be very out of line with that person's self-assessment. It's not clear those other person's assessments are less accurate – in some cases they're more accurate – as determined by relatively well-established objective psychological assessments. Third-person assessments can be both difficult to swallow – bitter medicine – and also extremely valuable. Because they're difficult to swallow, I would suggest taking them in small doses. But they can help us to learn about ourselves such things as that we can be unaccountably solicitous, or petty, or prone to one-up others, or thick-skinned. I've sometimes found myself thinking while speaking to someone, "If you could hear yourself talking right now, you might come to realize ..." Humblebragging is a case in point, in which someone is ostensibly complaining about a problem, but the subtext of what they're saying might be self-promoting as well.

All this has implications for those of us who teach. At the end of the semester I encourage my graduate assistants to read course evaluations; not to read them all at once, but instead try to take one suggestion from those evaluations that they can work on going into the next semester. I try to do the same. I would not, however, expect there ever to be a point at which one could say, "Ah! Now I fully know myself." Instead, this is more likely a process that we can pursue, and continue to benefit from, our entire lives.